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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002302

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SUBJECT: GENERAL PREM ON THE KING, THAKSIN, AND THE  
POLITICAL SITUATION

REF: BANGKOK 2280 (MEETING WITH WINAI)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda gave the Ambassador an upbeat assessment of political conditions, claiming the King remained in good health, elections would take place as anticipated, and PM Surayud enjoyed good relations with the Council for National Security. In an April 23 lunch with the Ambassador, Prem said that although he knew that deposed PM Thaksin blamed him for his overthrow, he (Prem) disavowed any involvement in the 2006 coup d'etat. Prem claimed not to have read the draft constitution, but he seemed to accept some of its widely publicized provisions. When the Ambassador noted the investment climate in Thailand seemed less welcoming to foreigners, Prem denied this was the case and expressed regret that neighboring countries might lure foreign capital away from Thailand. End Summary.

THE KING'S HEALTH

2. (C) In an April 23 four-eyes lunch at the Ambassador's residence, Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda covered a wide range of topics in light detail. Addressing King Bhumibol's health, Prem said the King was doing very well. He noted that the King made a point of educating himself on health issues -- particularly those affecting him personally. When the King experienced two episodes of heart trouble in the mid-1990s, the second was much easier for him to go through, as he had learned much about his condition -- even to the point of offering advice to his doctors. Now suffering from problems with his back, the King had taken a similar approach, he understood his condition, and he was not worried.

THAKSIN

3. (C) The Ambassador asked Prem about deposed PM Thaksin Shinawatra's claim, expressed in his recent visit to the U.S., that he had written to the King, pledging to quit politics. Prem said that he was unaware of such letters, but any effort of Thaksin to address correspondence directly to the King would be extraordinarily inappropriate, given the King's much higher status. Prem said that if Thaksin wanted to receive the Palace's views, he should have written to Arsa Sarasin, the King's Principal Private Secretary. Since Prem

had not heard of these letters from Arsa, he doubted they existed.

14. (C) Prem asked whether Thaksin was still in the U.S., and he expressed interest in whatever secondhand readout the Ambassador could provide of Thaksin's recent visit. Thaksin was "obsessed" with Prem, Prem observed, thinking that the Privy Council President had wide-ranging influence and had engineered the 2006 coup d'etat. Prem denied playing any role in the coup planning. (Comment: This denial, about which we are skeptical, is contrary to a widespread belief among members of the political class. What we believe is that the coup plotters went to Prem a few days before the coup to seek his tacit blessing. End Comment.)

#### SURAYUD'S STANDING

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15. (C) The Ambassador asked how Prem felt about Surayud's tenure as Prime Minister. Prem said he felt sorry for Surayud, who had not wanted the coup, had not wanted to become PM, and yet found himself in this position after having devoted much effort to keeping the military out of politics. Surayud was a good man, Prem said, and deserved a better cabinet than the current one. Prem observed that Surayud would soon appoint some new deputy ministers in order that they could do some of the heavy lifting that the ministers appeared unwilling or unable to do.

16. (C) Prem denied reports of a rift between Surayud's administration and the Council for National Security (CNS). The two sides enjoyed a close rapport, he said casually. Prem said he was generally optimistic about the situation in

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Thailand, and he was completely confident that elections would take place as anticipated, in December.

#### CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

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17. (C) Prem told the Ambassador he had not yet read the draft constitution and had little preliminary judgment about its provisions. Noting that the draft called for the appointment (rather than election) of Senators -- consistent with all Thai constitutions prior to 1997 -- Prem said he thought this would not be problematic. Whatever technique might be applied to select Senators, the important thing was to arrange for the Senate to consist of good people acceptable to the Thai people. The Ambassador explained that the USG would not put itself in the position of judging the propriety of every provision of the constitution; our main concern was that the drafters ensure that their product reflect and address the aspirations of the Thai people.

18. (C) Prem also indicated he had no qualms with the planned shift from single-member electoral districts to multi-member districts. Since the draft envisioned districts being approximately the same size and each having three representatives in the House of Representatives, the votes of Thai citizens would all carry equal weight, Prem noted.

19. (C) Addressing the plans of some Buddhist organizations to call for revision of the draft to include Buddhism's designation as Thailand's official religion, Prem said that if the vast majority of the people wanted this provision, he had no objections. The Ambassador remarked that Thai Muslims in the South might ask themselves why, after this provision was rejected by all previous constitution drafters, it would be judged acceptable at this point in time. Such a break with precedent might send a negative signal about the inclusiveness of Thai society. Prem acknowledged this concern.

CHAVALIT

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¶10. (C) The Ambassador asked Prem for his assessment of former PM Chavalit Yongchaiyudh's political activities. Prem indicated that he was not particularly concerned about Chavalit's maneuvers. (Comment: Chavalit remains of concern to members of the CNS -- see reftel. We note that Prem likely takes Chavalit less seriously because of Prem's seniority, whereas CNS members are junior to Chavalit. End Comment.) Prem did appear interested when the Ambassador remarked that Chavalit reportedly remained actively engaged with former members of his New Aspiration Party, many of whom subsequently became top Thai Rak Thai officials. The Ambassador asked Prem about his efforts to heal a public rift between Chavalit and CNS Deputy Secretary General Saprang Kalayanamitr. Prem simply smiled, declining the invitation to comment.

#### INVESTMENT CLIMATE

¶11. (C) The Ambassador concluded the meeting by remarking that the investment climate in Thailand had taken a turn for the worse in recent months. Draft amendments to the Foreign Business Act, the brief-lived capital controls debacle in December, and the clumsy issuance of compulsory licenses for medications signaled to foreigners that the Thai market was no longer as open and welcoming as it used to be. Prem said this perception was regrettable, as he believed Thailand remained open to foreign investment. The Ambassador noted that other countries in the region, such as Vietnam, might lure U.S. capital away from coming to Thailand. Prem acknowledged that Vietnam appeared to be an appealing site for investment, but it would be unfortunate if a communist country were to benefit at Thailand's expense.

#### COMMENT

¶12. (C) Prem was relaxed, and the discussion covered a wide range of topics, including social pleasantries. Although Prem wields great political influence, he clearly wanted to convey the impression that he was relatively disengaged and not closely monitoring conditions or directing events.

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Whether this is indeed the truth is not clear, but is almost beside the point. Given Prem's proximity to the King, political actors will continue to seek his blessing for major initiatives. We are encouraged by Prem's conviction that the elections will take place in December as promised; we have made clear to our interlocutors that we would be extremely concerned by any further slippage in the election date.  
BOYCE